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**“Some politics is local: an analysis of the roots of involvement
in national and local politics in Europe”**

(Currently under peer review)

1. Introduction

Is political engagement towards different territorial levels explained by the same factors? The literature about the sources of involvement in politics is ample and diverse, but most converges in treating its dependent variables as one-dimensional from a territorial perspective. Concretely, there is a lack of cross-national inquiries examining if the predictors driving involvement in national politics are the same than those behind local politics. In this article, we examine this question and show how levels of political discussion about different jurisdictional scales can be accounted for by different factors.

The existence of parallel layers of government – local, national, and in some instances regional and supra-national – is by now an archetypal attribute of democratic polities. However, only recently have researchers given systematic consideration to differences in degrees of involvement towards each of them (Coffé, 2013; Shaker, 2012). Two converging analytical routes downplay, implicitly or explicitly, the significance of territorial levels in generalizations and causal explanations about the patterns and sources of political engagement.

The first approach consists in focusing on engagement writ large, regardless of the territorial level at stake (Baybeck, 2014, p. 98). For instance, authors dealing with political involvement frequently take into account actions conducted at various territorial levels, but then pool them together into a single composite dimension (Verba et al., 1995). Also, the wording of questions upon which survey research about interest in politics or other variables is based (Sanders and Bellucci, 2012; van Deth and Elff, 2004) typically does not refer to a specific territorial level, therefore denoting a *generalist* engagement with politics. The consequence is that scholars end up dealing with the determinants of involvement with politics writ large, without probing whether their conclusions can be extended to different jurisdictional scales.

The second strategy that leads to neglecting the importance of territorial levels is dealing exclusively with one of them, which more often than not is the national one. In this case, the instruments used to measure political involvement do not account for other

jurisdictional scales, making it impossible to trace whether individuals devote comparable levels of investment to distinct levels of politics. While it is hard to dispute that the national level of politics has the highest impact on the lives of the majority of citizens, by focusing only on it we may conceal relevant dimensions of how citizens interact with the political realm (Oliver, 2012, pp. 1–2).

Over recent years, various authors have offered theoretical arguments and provided substantive evidence in support of the case that the drivers of engagement towards distinct levels of politics *do* vary. It has been shown, for instance, that the gender gap in self-reported interest in politics depends on the territorial level in question (Coffé, 2013). Studies conducted in Finland (Rapeli, 2014) and the US (Shaker, 2012) demonstrate that factual knowledge about politics, a variable closely associated with political engagement, is not constant for the same individual depending on the jurisdictional scale at stake. These and other contributions, which are reviewed in greater detail in the following section, advocate that long held assumptions about the determinants of political engagement can and should be refined.

Against that backdrop, this article examines the frequency of discussion about national and local political matters in a set of European countries. Instead of assuming beforehand that the determinants of political discussion are one-dimensional – i.e. that they do not vary depending on the territorial level of government at stake – we question whether that is actually the case. The analysis is pursued by examining the roots of different profiles of engagement in local and national politics, therefore allowing us to grasp the origins of qualitatively different forms of political involvement.

The research strategy introduces three novel aspects with respect to the previous literature about political engagement towards different jurisdictional scales. First, rather than examining subjective interest or objective knowledge, it takes a new dependent variable into focus: the frequency of political discussion. Political discussion is often used as a proxy for political engagement, yet it has remained overlooked why do some individuals discuss some dimensions of politics more frequently than others. Second, the empirical analysis is not restricted to a single country, but is instead extended to 31 European countries, thus offering room for generalizing with greater confidence. The countries under analysis include the member-states of the EU and candidate countries at different stages of their economic and political development, therefore providing a wide range of national contexts. Third, the article tests a broader range of hypotheses in comparison with previous research, both at the individual and macro-level. By testing the

impact of economic development and decentralisation we specifically account for the multilevel structure of the data and are able to understand that variations are due mostly to individual rather than country-level factors – contrarily to what research about “generalist” political engagement would make us expect (Inglehart, 1990; Sanders and Bellucci, 2012).

The results show that more than a quarter of individuals report discussing local and national political issues with different frequencies. Interestingly, this is not at the expense of local politics, which is more relevant for a significant share (15%) of respondents. Besides, the same factors can play different roles in fostering (or preventing) discussion depending on the level at stake. For instance, individuals living in rural areas, all else being equal, are more likely to discuss local political matters than inhabitants of cities; those with higher educational achievements will be more likely to discuss national politics rather than local politics; and while individuals from richer countries are slightly more likely to report higher levels of engagement towards national politics, the effect of economic development does not seem to be very pronounced. Overall, contrariwise to previous research about (generalist) political discussion (Inglehart, 1990), levels of involvement towards different geographic scales seem to vary more as a function of individual-level variables rather than macro-level factors. These and other findings reported in the fifth section reinforce that political involvement assumes different shapes, and that failing to acknowledge so may introduce a bias in our evaluation of the engagement of society writ large.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature about the determinants of (generalist) political discussion and discusses the recent thread of scholarship that deals with political behaviour and attitudes across diverse territorial levels. The following section presents the research hypotheses, and the fourth section introduces the data and models. The fifth section reports the results of the analysis. The article concludes with a discussion about the findings and what they might imply for our understanding of political engagement.

2. Literature review

Since the emergence of comparative research about political behaviour, it has been noted that political engagement is not uniformly distributed neither across nor within societies (Almond and Verba, 1965). In trying to understand differences in the degree of involvement with politics, scholars have stressed the importance of an ample set of

individual-level attributes, as well as the relevance of social contexts and institutional settings. Cross-national studies make the case that a thorough understanding of what makes individuals more likely to be engaged in politics must take into account both micro and macro factors (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Nir, 2012).

This section presents two streams of literature that inform our research hypotheses. First, we overview the determinants of political discussion writ large, without taking territorial levels into account. We then discuss recent scholarship that, while not addressing the roots of political discussion, looks at related outcomes taking into account differences regarding the jurisdictional scales at stake.

2.1. (Generalist) political discussion and its determinants

Frequency of political discussion holds a singular position among the variables measuring the political involvement of individuals (Gabriel and van Deth, 1995, p. 396). Unlike other variables such as (self-reported) levels of interest in politics, it is not intended to capture an attitude or predisposition, but rather the respondents' recollection of their actual behaviour. Still, "the informal context" in which political discussions take place is likely to restrain the potential implications of that behaviour (Gabriel and van Deth, 1995, p. 396), which is why scholars generally do not consider it as a form of proper political participation (Verba et al., 1995, p. 362).

Hence, questions about how often individuals engage in political discussion are used as a proxy for measuring "political involvement" (Inglehart, 1990, p. 342), "political interest" (van Deth and Elff, 2004, p. 480) or "informal political engagement" (Sanders and Bellucci, 2012): respondents that state they discuss politics frequently can be assumed to be more involved in politics than those who report never doing so. Factor analysis (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010, p. 995) corroborates that frequency of political discussion and (self-reported) interest in politics are indeed highly correlated.

Widespread public involvement with political matters is generally understood as being positive, and the declining trend in recent decades of variables like voter turnout and civil society membership is interpreted as a potential threat to the quality of democracy (Putnam, 2000; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). Interestingly, while it is established that "formal" involvement in politics is in decline, the reported frequency of political discussion has not decreased in a comparable vein (Sanders and Bellucci, 2012). Therefore, while "formal" and "informal" engagement are often found to be correlated at

the individual level, their degree of association is not static from a macro, longitudinal perspective.

Although not being as central a topic in the literature as voter turnout or other modes of political participation, the volume of research aimed at unveiling specifically the roots of political discussion has increased in recent years¹. It is now accepted that both individual and macro-level factors play a role in fostering political discussion (Inglehart, 1990). The literature presents some lines of overall convergence, but there is still disagreement regarding the magnitude and direction of some effects.

Gender is perhaps the factor that has attracted the most attention (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), with cross-national studies showing the persistence of a gender gap in the frequency political discussion, although its magnitude is reported to be in decline (Inglehart, 1990, p. 348). Another predictor of political discussion is the level of resources, both financial and educational. In their analysis of responses from a representative US sample surveyed in 1989, Verba et al. find that political discussion is positively affected by the level of income. Interestingly, educational resources do not seem to have an impact in the likelihood of discussing politics. An analysis of survey data from Hong Kong leads identical conclusions (Lee, 2009). Conversely, based on longitudinal data, Inglehart finds that those who achieve higher levels of education are consistently more likely to discuss politics (Inglehart, 1990, p. 345). This finding was supported by subsequent analyses (Sanders and Bellucci, 2012; van Deth and Elff, 2004). Inglehart (1990, p. 351) also finds evidence of life-cycle effects, as there is a curvilinear (inverted-U) distribution of political discussion after controlling for the fact that younger generations hold higher levels of education.

Other authors followed Inglehart's approach of looking at longitudinal data. Sanders and Bellucci analyse samples from EU member-states for the 1975-2007 period, and contribute with additional findings at the micro level. For instance, they show that as individuals place themselves further away from the ideological centre they tend to discuss politics more frequently, as do individuals with a managerial occupation, in contrast with manual workers and unemployed individuals.

The study of the roots of political discussion has evolved by also looking at the impact of macro contexts, which have been found to play a key role in explaining cross-

¹ A branch of the literature that falls behind the scope of this article deals with the extent to which political discussions are circumscribed to like-minded individuals (Eveland and Hively, 2009).

national differences. Indeed, Inglehart's (1990, p. 352) assertion that nationality is the "strongest predictor of political discussion" was followed by several attempts to understand whether such macro differences could be attributed to structural and cultural factors. Thus, Van Deth and Elff (2004) find that economic development fosters the levels of discussion about politics. This contradicts the results of Sanders and Bellucci, who do not find evidence of national GDP being a relevant predictor of discussion frequency. On the other hand, these authors find economic environment to be important: while higher levels of unemployment have a negative impact in the frequency of political discussion, inflation exerts a positive effect. The political landscape also exerts an effect, as individuals from countries exhibiting higher levels of ideological polarization are more likely to engage in political discussions.

The case that more inclusive institutions pave the way to higher levels of political discussion has been strengthened in recent years (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Nir, 2012). Specifically, by exploiting the interaction of micro and macro level variables, these studies show how the gender gap in levels of political engagement can be reduced in the presence of inclusive institutions, most notably having a PR electoral system, as these attenuate the negative effect of some individual factors.

Overall, the literature here reviewed signals that (generalist) discussion about political matters can be understood as the result of both individual as well as contextual indicators. Among the former, gender, education and socioeconomic status should be highlighted. At the macro level, there is mixed evidence that higher economic development fosters discussion and strong signs that institutions inducing power-sharing facilitate political discussion.

2.2. Other relevant research

Frequency of political discussion has been found to be highly correlated with variables such as subjective interest in politics, political sophistication and exposure to news coverage of current affairs (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010, p. 995). Unlike political discussion, however, the roots of some of these outcomes have been disentangled based on the territorial level at stake when featuring models as dependent variables. This has allowed some established findings about the engagement of specific groups of the citizenry to be challenged. The remainder of this section covers the findings of studies that have dealt with these outcomes and that inform the development of our hypotheses.

As mentioned above, gender is regarded as a reliable predictor of political discussion, with women being generally less akin to be engaged in politics. However, based on an analysis of data from a British sample, Coffé (2013) shows that male respondents tend to report higher levels of subjective interest in national and international issues, whereas female respondents are relatively more interested in local affairs. Therefore, identifying politics exclusively with the national sphere may induce an overestimation of the political apathy of women, and exaggerate the perceived gender gap in political engagement.

Studies of political sophistication provide another interesting source of insights about differences in political involvement depending on the level at stake. This branch of research draws mostly from the performance of individuals when questioned about national and international political matters (Zaller, 1992). However, if one concedes that politics takes place along multiple territorial layers, then questions employed to measure sophistication should be adjusted accordingly. Shaker (2012) analyses the distribution of political knowledge about local and national matters in Philadelphia, USA and his findings challenge the established perception on civic competence: while the distribution of knowledge about national politics is skewed along the usual lines of gender, race and socioeconomic status, a comparatively less biased scenario emerges when local matters are at stake. The underperformance of minorities, women and lower income people is attenuated once local politics is taken into account.

Analogous findings emerge from a study conducted by Rapeli (2014) about political knowledge in Finland. Individuals from rural areas, for instance, tend to perform better when asked about their local settings than their urban counterparts. In addressing citizens' discrepant performances about local, national and European engagement, Rapeli argues that people invest differently in issues that are linked with specific territorial levels of government. The corollary is that "operationalising political knowledge only through national-level politics leads to a fundamentally imperfect picture of political knowledge" (Rapeli, 2014, p. 443).

So far we have looked mainly at variables that are highly correlated with political discussion, but other branches of literature also provide insights on how the factors behind political mobilization can differ. Research about the determinants of turnout in first and second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) suggests that local elections, by having "less at stake", draw a different set of voters, as demonstrated in a study of turnout determinants in municipal, European and national elections in the Netherlands (Lefevere

and Van Aelst, 2014). A recent meta-analysis of the literature on turnout at the aggregate level also reveals that rates of voter participation in national and subnational elections are driven by different factors (Cancela and Geys, 2016).

In sum, in recent years research about various dimensions of political engagement has shown that findings about generalist involvement may be refined once we decompose it into distinct territorial dimensions. While offering fruitful insights, this ramification of the literature is still lacking the incorporation of macro-level variables as those already included in the study of generalist political discussion. The following section bridges the two branches of the literature reviewed above and presents our research hypotheses.

3. Hypotheses

The insights exposed in the previous section allow us to develop hypotheses regarding the drivers of political discussion about different jurisdictional scales. In the following paragraphs we list our research hypotheses formulated at the individual and country level.

Starting with individual-level factors, our first hypothesis concerns the influence of the type of community inhabited by individuals as a factor affecting the scope of political discussion they engage with. In a classic study of local politics in France, Tarrow (1971, p. 356) highlights that some citizens from rural communities would report an ostensive detachment towards national politics and parties, while remaining actively engaged with local political affairs. Moreover, we know that inhabitants from cities (Rapeli, 2014) show higher levels of political knowledge regarding national affairs, while individuals from rural areas tend to perform better when asked about local matters. Since levels of (generalist) political sophistication and discussion tend to be associated, we can expect that those who know more about one level of politics will also be more likely to talk about it. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H1: Individuals from rural areas will be more engaged in discussions about local politics, while city residents will be more engaged in discussions about national politics.

Our second hypothesis regards the impact of education and socioeconomic status. Studies about political sophistication (Shaker, 2012) reveal that the performance gap between lowly and highly educated people is diminished if knowledge about local politics is taken into account. We hypothesise that this relationship can also be found in political

discussion, as the local level of politics may present itself as having direct relevance to the lives of less educated individuals, while presenting comparatively lower hurdles for discussing it. Conversely, those in the higher end of society are expected to consume more information about national political issues (Verba et al., 1995) and translate such exposure into more frequent discussions about it. Therefore we expect that:

H2: Respondents with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status will be more engaged in discussions about national politics, while respondents with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status will be more engaged in discussions about local politics

Our third hypothesis at the individual level deals with the impact of civil society organisations in fostering political engagement. A considerable number of empirical studies have shown that members of associations consistently exhibit higher levels of political participation than non-members (Almond and Verba, 1965; Verba et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000). While some contend that organisations do not generate more engaged individuals but instead pool them together (van der Meer and van Ingen, 2009), we can nevertheless expect that members of organisations will discuss politics more frequently than non-members. It has also been argued that not all civil society organisations have identical effects in terms of political socialisation (Quintelier, 2008). This argument can be extended to the jurisdictional scale that members of organisations engage it: while we should expect membership in a development aid organisation to foster political discussion mainly at the national level, a leisure association for the elderly probably does not exert a similar effect. We can expect the effect exerted by organisations upon their members' level engagement to depend on their preferential scope of intervention. Therefore we expect that:

H3.A: A more intense involvement with civil society organisations oriented towards the national level will lead to more frequent discussion about national politics.

H3.B: A more intense involvement with civil society organisations oriented towards the local level will lead to more frequent discussion about local politics.

In addition to individual-level factors, macro variables have been shown to influence political engagement. Given the cross-national nature of our study, two hypotheses at the country level will be tested. The first of them deals with the impact of economic development on the degrees of political interest. Van Deth and Elff (2004) conclude that frequency of (generalist) political discussion varies as a function of national economic development. Analogous findings emerge from research about the levels of political participation in Eastern Europe (Hooghe and Quintelier, 2014). Here, we hypothesise that economic development will be more associated with interest in national rather than local politics. Modernisation theory suggests that economic development produces a homogeneously integrated, national public, increasingly void of the peculiarities of local political subcultures (Sellers et al., 2013). On the other hand, following Tarrow (1971), it can be hypothesised that individuals from comparatively lower income contexts can feel detached from the national level of politics, while keeping the habit of discussing local political affairs. Our fourth hypothesis is thus:

H4 – Living in a country with a higher GDP will increase interest in national politics.

In addition to economic development, a relevant institutional factor that can be expected to foster interest in local politics is the level of decentralization of the polity. We posit that citizens will be more likely to develop an interest in what is going on at the local level if it bears significance for their lives. In their seminal study, Almond and Verba (1965, p. 125) stress that the patterns of citizens' attitudes towards their local governments vary precisely because the "structure of government and community organization changes from one nation to another". It has also been shown by Fitzgerald and Wolak (2014) that levels of trust in local and regional authorities vary as a function of the degree decentralization of a polity. Thus our final hypothesis reads:

H5 – Living in a country with a higher degree of decentralization will foster a higher level of interest in local politics

4. Data and methods

Several studies about (generalist) political discussion in Europe (Inglehart, 1990; Sanders and Bellucci, 2012; van Deth and Elff, 2004) rely on data from the Eurobarometer, which since 1973 has asked the following question: “*When you get together with friends would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?*” Our research question requires data about political discussion about multiple jurisdictional scales, which this question does not provide. However, since 2010 the Eurobarometer surveys have regularly included a question that replicates the above formulation for local, national, and European matters.

Eurobarometer 73.4 (European Commission, 2013, fieldwork: May 2010), was selected among possible alternatives since it featured questions that allowed testing our hypotheses. The survey was conducted in 31 European countries, namely all current member states of the European Union plus Turkey, Macedonia (FYROM) and Iceland. We opted for keeping the complete set of countries as we want to test our hypotheses in as wide a set of polities as possible. By also including non-member-states, we expand the range of economic development and political trajectories of countries, which increases the potential for generalization of our findings.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Our dependent variable is the profile of political discussion exhibited by respondents. As we are interested in the interplay between the engagement towards local and national political matters, a new variable was generated based on the combination of the values of the variables about “local” and “national” political discussion². We simplify the range of outcomes by aggregating the nine possible combinations into four *profiles of engagement* (Table 1). “Disengaged” (“D”) respondents are those who never discuss neither local nor national political matters. If individuals report an identical frequency of discussion (for instance, by occasionally discussing local and national politics), they are labelled as “equally engaged” (“E”). Respondents can be “more engaged in national discussions” (“N”) or, conversely, “more engaged in local discussions” (“L”), if they report participating in discussions about one of them more frequently. Our goal is to

² Refusing to answer and answering “Don’t know” were set as being equivalent to “Never” discussing politics.

assess what makes individuals more likely to fall in each of the profiles, and particularly in these last two.

As the dependent variable is categorical and non-ordered, a classical linear model is not appropriate. The responses are also clustered at the country level, and two of the hypotheses are formulated accordingly. We thus rely on a multilevel logistic model and perform a series of contrasts in order to account for the non-binary nature of the response variable (Gelman and Hill, 2007, p. 124). Since the dependent variable has four possible outcomes, we set three binomial contrasts, using the most frequent category of engagement profile (“E: equally interested”) as a baseline against which the likelihood of holding an alternative profile (“D: Disengaged”, “N: more into national”, and “L: more into local”) is tested. Overall, this procedure is equivalent with performing a (multilevel) multinomial logistic regression (Begg and Gray, 1984), but relies on less demanding computational routines.

Independent variables at the individual and country level used in the model are summarised in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 will be tested using responses to a question about the type of community the respondent lives in: a rural area, a small/middle town or a big town. Our second hypothesis poses that individuals with higher levels of educational achievement and with a higher socioeconomic status shall engage more in discussions about national politics, whereas the reverse should hold for less-educated, lower status individuals. For the purpose of testing this we include variables about the age upon completion of education and self-placement in the socioeconomic ladder. Hypothesis 3 takes into account the organisational memberships of respondents in 12 types of organisations. These organisations were classified as either having a local, national or hybrid scope³.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Hypotheses 4 and 5 are tested using country-level data. The 2010 figures of Gross Domestic Product per capita based on purchase power parity were obtained from the International Monetary Fund (2014) and transformed into the logarithmic scale. H4, about the impact of decentralization, is evaluated using the ratio of expenditure by local authorities *vis-à-vis* expenditures by the central government. We use this as a proxy for

³ Details about the operationalisation of this variable are available in the appendix.

the relevance of local governments in respondents' lives: individuals from countries where local authorities spend more should be expected to be more affected by local level politics and therefore more likely to engage in discussions about it.

In order to control other individual factors identified in the literature about we include *gender*, *age* and *occupation* as individual-level variables. Since there is research showing that women claim a higher level of interest in local politics, we can expect this to be reflected in their frequency of discussion. We also include age, to which a curvilinear (inverted-U) effect has been attributed in fostering (generalist) political engagement. Finally, we include a variable for occupation, with can have three responses: inactive, professional/managerial and manual worker. While we do not expect these two variables to play a significant role in nurturing engagement towards a specific jurisdictional scale at the expense of other, we include them in the equation in order to account for their eventual effects.

The survey features 30,215 responses, of which complete data for the variables used in the model is available for 28,695 cases. The data analysis was carried out using R and the models were fitted using package *lme4* (Bates et al., 2014).

5. Results

Before examining the performance of the model we glance at the distribution of profiles of political engagement, pooled (Table 3) and within countries (Figure 1). A robust degree of association exists between the regularity of discussion about both levels of politics, with around 73% of respondents reporting identical frequencies: approximately 55% state that they occasionally or frequently discuss both levels, while 18% report never discussing neither of them. The reverse angle, however, is that more than a quarter of respondents report an unequal likelihood of entertaining discussions about the two jurisdictional scales. The proportion of those in the sample reporting a higher interest in local politics (14.4%) exceeds, even if by a small margin, those reporting a higher interest in national politics (12.6%). This balance between the two profiles is a noteworthy finding in itself, as it signals that engagement with national political matters does not exceed involvement in local affairs.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Similarly to van Deth and Elff (2004), and Sanders and Bellucci (2012) we also find considerable levels of variation in political discussion across countries (Figure 1). Disengaged citizens are typically more abundant in Southern and Eastern Europe and scarcer in North-western Europe – Greece being an exception as noted in prior research (van Deth and Elff, 2004). Most countries replicate the global pattern of having similar proportions of citizens who are more interested in local matters, on the one hand, and national politics, on the other. It is also noteworthy that the proportion of individuals who are more engaged with national politics shows higher variance across countries than the proportion of individuals who are more engaged with local politics. As will be seen, this has direct implications for our fifth hypothesis. Still, the ratio is not constant: in some countries interest in local politics is more widespread (e.g. Croatia, Bulgaria or Italy), while in others (e.g. Iceland, the Netherlands) the opposite happens.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

We now focus on the results of our statistical analysis. Table 4 reports the odds ratios for the three contrasts, along with lower and upper bounds of their 95% confidence intervals. Each column from (1) to (3) reproduces results relative to a contrast between the baseline (“equally engaged”) and one of the alternative outcomes. The odds ratios refer to the effect that a one unit change in one of the independent variables brings to the probability of moving from the baseline outcome “equally engaged” (“E”) towards one of the alternative outcomes: “disengaged” (“D”), “more engaged in national matters” (“N”), and “more engaged in local matters” (“L”). For instance, the odd ratios associated with the category “female” are 1.56, 0.86, and 1.19, respectively. In these three cases, the 95% confidence intervals do not contain 0. Thus, according to our results women are considerably more likely to fall in “D” and more likely to fall in “L” as opposed to “E” and especially “N”.

Before proceeding to the results in the second and third columns, which are those of greater interest given our research question, we glance at the odd ratios reproduced in column (1), assessing the impact of the tested variables in the probability of being disengaged towards both levels of politics. Overall, the findings are in line with previous research about the roots of generalist political discussion. Higher socioeconomic status

and more years of education, as well as being male, increase the likelihood of being equally engaged in both levels of politics rather than disengaged. The effect of age resembles a skewed and inverted U-shape, with the age group more likely to be involved in politics being the 55-64 years segment. Being a member of multiple civil society organisations focused on the local level of politics also increases the likelihood of engaging in political discussion as opposed to staying disengaged. Interestingly, the odd ratios of macro-level effects are near 1 and deprived of significance.

The most interesting results given our research question are those reproduced in columns (2) and (3), which present the odds ratios for the contrasts between the common baseline “E” and the outcomes “N” and “L”. When compared to the results of contrast (1), the odds ratios are closer to 1, suggesting that the explanatory variables are less powerful as predictors of moving from the baseline to the alternative outcomes.

In order to improve the interpretability of the results, the plots reproduced in Figure 2 illustrate the effect of changes in the independent variables of interest. Figure 2 focuses on just two of the alternatives to the baseline, “N” and “L”, leaving aside the predicted probabilities of being disengaged towards both levels of politics. Each plot within the figure shows the predicted probability of moving from the baseline “E” towards one of the outcomes “N” and “L”, given the values for the independent variables expressed in the horizontal axis, while holding the remaining variables at their mean value. In order to present a sensible probability estimate we must take into account that the sum of probabilities for the four possible outcomes must add up to 1. Thus, each estimated value is multiplied by the proportion of individuals in each contrast relative to the overall sample.

Each line (in the case of continuous variables) and point (in the case of categorical variables) is supplemented by a 95% confidence interval. A positive slope indicates a positive relationship between an increase in the value of the independent variable value and the probability of moving from the baseline response (“E”) towards the alternative outcome (“N”, or “L”). Since in all of the three contrasts the binomial distribution is skewed towards “E”, the range of predicted probabilities is relatively narrow. However, the proportions of “E” are roughly equivalent across the two contrasts, which contributes to the comparability between coefficients and predicted probabilities.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Our first hypothesis posits that inhabitants from different types of communities would show different degrees of engagement towards different territorial levels. The plotted probabilities in Figure 2 show that living in a rural area is a useful predictor of the type of discussions individuals engage with. In the contrast between the baseline category and the alternative of being more engaged in discussions about local politics, inhabitants from rural areas have a predicted probability of being more engaged in local politics of 0.16, as opposed to 0.11 of residents in big towns. The difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The results also show that living in a rural area does not foster discussion about national politics in a comparable way: the predicted probability of moving from the baseline towards the alternative outcome “N” is 0.12, which does not significantly differ from the 0.11 of residents of cities. The effect of the type of community is not symmetrical in the sense that there is not a comparable gap between the inclination to talking about national politics between residents in big cities and residents in rural areas.

According to our second hypothesis, individuals with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status should be more prone to discussing national politics than respondents who are less educated and have a lower status. The results show that, on average, each year of completed education gives respondents a 0.3 percentage point higher probability of moving towards “N” and a 0.5 percentage point lower probability of moving towards “L”. The implication is that our hypothesis is confirmed especially outside the central values of the distribution: individuals who left school before turning 18 years old (who correspond to approximately 40% of the sample) are more likely to be engaged in local politics; conversely, those who finished their education at the age of 24 or older (10% of respondents in the sample) are more likely to report a higher engagement towards national politics. The impact of self-reported SES is more modest, as the less steep slopes confirm. While respondents who identify as having a status of 3 or lower (13% of the sample) are more likely to fall in the “L” category, the differences fall outside statistical significance for the remaining respondents.

Hypothesis 3 regards organisational membership and has a twofold formulation. H3.A posited that membership in organisations oriented towards the national level would have an effect in fostering discussion about national politics. However, this is not corroborated by our analysis. A respondent who is not a member of any organisation with a national scope has a 0.11 probability of being more engaged in discussions about

national politics, and an increase of one (organisation) brings only a 0.01 increase in the chance of moving from the baseline towards “N”.

H3.B, on the other hand, argued that members of organisations with a local scope will be more likely to engage in discussions about local affairs. Thus, the effect of membership in local associations seems to be stronger: each membership brings a 0.02 change of moving from the baseline towards “L” and a -0.02 change in moving towards “N”. In practical terms, a member of one single association devoted to local issues (17.9% of the sample) has a 0.12 chance of being more engaged in national discussions, and a 0.15 of being more engaged in local elections. As the ribbons in the plot do not intersect, this difference is statistically significant. The effect is amplified if the respondent is a member of two or three or more such organisations, but the number of respondents under these circumstances is low (5.7% and 2.6% respectively).

Our second set of hypotheses deals with macro-level factors. Figure 1 shows that variations within countries regarding the distribution of the “N” and “L” profiles are not very salient. However, we cannot reject the possibility of macro-level factors mitigating or exacerbating the effect of individual-level variables; therefore, testing hypotheses formulated at the country-level remains an important part of the analysis.

Hypothesis 4 posited that living in a wealthier country would enhance the probability of being more engaged in national politics. The plot shows that moving from the lower end of the spectrum of logged GDP values towards its upper end doubles the predicted probability of having a profile of type “N” from 0.08 to 0.16. However, as the ribbon around the line illustrates, there is a large error associated with this estimate, and the predicted probabilities for intermediate positions of GDP per capita are so close to each other that their differences are not statistically significant. Also, contrary to our hypothesis, a higher GDP also seems to foster the likelihood of moving from the baseline towards a higher interest in local matters, although the slope is smaller and the associated error is higher. Therefore, while there seems to be evidence of an impact of economic development in increasing the likelihood of discussing about national politics the effect is not as strong or exclusive to national politics as initially expected.

Finally, the hypothesis that living in a more decentralized country stimulates the propensity to discuss local matters (H6) is not fully met. While it is true that individuals from countries where local governments are responsible for a negligible fraction of public expenditure will tend to discuss local politics less often than individuals from countries where the local government spends more, the errors associated with those predictions are

large. Moreover, an increase in the proportion of money spent also leads to a small growth in the probability of discussing national politics. Taken together, the results of the two macro-level hypotheses suggest that country-level factors may not play a relevant role in inducing individuals to move to specifically inducing discussion about either local or national issues.

6. Conclusions

While it would be an overstatement to argue that jurisdictional scales have been completely absent from the research about political behaviour, there is a scarcity of cross-national studies about the drivers of involvement towards different levels of politics. This article use survey data collected in a wide set of European polities to show that the frequency of political discussion about different territorial levels is not a function of the same set of factors. Levels of education, the types of organisation one is a member of or the type of community one lives in, for instance, play a significant role in determining the type of political discussions one is more likely to engage with.

Conversely, evidence of the impact of macro-level factors in fostering a differential engagement towards distinct jurisdictional scales is not as compelling as initially hypothesised, despite earlier research having established that contextual factors matter a great deal to the levels of generalist political engagement (Inglehart, 1990). Even in countries in an advanced stage of economic development, there is the persistence of groups of individuals who remain more likely to discuss local affairs. Furthermore, engagement with local politics does not seem to be contingent upon the devolution of significant powers to local authorities. Given these results, it can be fruitful for future studies to add the temporal dimension into the analysis, by using surveys conducted over multiple periods of time and testing whether the evolution of macro-contexts brings changes to the probability of being more engaged in discussing one specific level of politics.

Two further implications can be derived from our results, the first being of a substantive nature. A classical thesis about political change in developed countries asserts that a process of “nationalization of politics” dilutes local peculiarities and, consequently, their role as fosterers of political engagement (Caramani, 2004; Sellers et al., 2013, pp. 1–10). Our analysis shows that the profile of an engaged citizen is not as rigidly defined as could be assumed if we focused exclusively on the national level of politics. Across

Europe, an important share of individuals in groups that are perceived as more likely to be apathetic towards politics writ large regularly take part in discussions about local political affairs. Thus, in a context of growing disengagement towards politics (Dēmētriou, 2013, pp. 6–7), the findings presented in this article suggest that interest in local affairs still play a role in keeping a sizable share of individuals attached to the political realm, even if outside the scope of national politics. This effect of local political engagement should not be overlooked.

The second implication is methodological and is related to the underlying assumptions that members of the public may hold when answering questions about their political engagement. Indeed, the bias towards identifying politics exclusively with the national level of politics may not be restricted to authors. Our results signal that determinants of discussion about national politics, more than those for discussion of local matters, are in line with the explanatory variables of generalist political discussion (Sanders and Bellucci, 2012; van Deth and Elff, 2004). As Fitzgerald (2013) demonstrates, a diversity of parallel conceptions of what is and is not political might coexist across the public; nevertheless, the performance of our model suggests that generalist studies may capture an underlying conception of “politics” that identifies it essentially with the national scale. In order to avoid crystallising an identification of politics with only one of its territorial axes, more research should keep into account investment in those different spheres. While this approach has already been followed in studies about voter turnout and party choice in local elections (Lefevere and Van Aelst, 2014; Marien et al., 2015), it should be extended to other dimensions of political behaviour. One direction that might prove particularly fruitful in the future is analysing whether individuals who exhibit different profiles are involved in different modes of political participation.

It should be clear that we do not advocate that focusing only on the national level of politics or that embracing a generalist perspective are malpractices in the study political engagement. Indeed, either approach may be the most fruitful in light of researchers’ particular goals. However, by invariably following either of these strategies we may end up ignoring important shades of how citizens practice their democratic citizenship.

Table 1. Profiles of engagement across territorial levels

Local matters			
	Never/DK/NA	Occasionally	Frequently

	Never/DK/NA	D	L	L
National matters	Occasionally	N	E	L
	Frequently	N	N	E

Note to table Table 1:

D: “Disengaged”; E: “Equally engaged”; N: “More engaged in national”; L: “More engaged in local”
Original question: “When you get together with friends or relatives, would you say you discuss frequently, occasionally or never about...?” (“National political matters”; “European political matters”; “Local political matters”). Source: European Commission (2013, QA2)

Table 2. Summary of independent variables used in the analysis

<i>Individual level</i>						
Categories						
Gender	Female: 54% Male: 46%					
Age group	15-24: 12.4%; 25-34: 15.1% 35-44: 17.4% 45-54: 17.4% 55-64: 16.6% >64: 21.1%					
Occupation	Non-active: 52.9% Manual worker: 27.6% Professional/Managerial: 19.5%					
Type of community	Rural: 35.6% Small/middle town: 35.3% Big town 29%					
Continuous	Min		Max	Mean	Std. Dev	
Organisational membership in national organisations	0	(not members)	3	(3+ organisations)	0.32	0.69
Organisational membership in local organisations	0	(not member)	3	(3+ organisations)	0.37	0.71
Age when finished full-time education	10	(or younger)	30	(or older)	18.5	4.3
Socio-economic status (self-placement)	1		10		5.4	1.7
<i>Country level</i>						
	Min		Max	Mean	Std. Dev	
Log(GDP 2010[USD])	8.44		11.56	10.02	0.71	
Local government spending / central government spending	1.4		64.4	28.3	0.13	

Note to table 2:

n = 29,234 individuals from 31 countries: France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Sweden, Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Croatia, Macedonia, and Iceland.

Table 3. Frequency of outcomes: profiles of engagement

Profile	Frequency	Percent in sample
Disengaged - Not interested in none (D)	5,092	17.7
Equally interested (E)	15,797	55.1
More into national (N)	3,633	12.7
More into local (L)	4,173	14.5
Total	28,695	100

Figure 1. Distribution of profiles of engagement within countries (proportions)

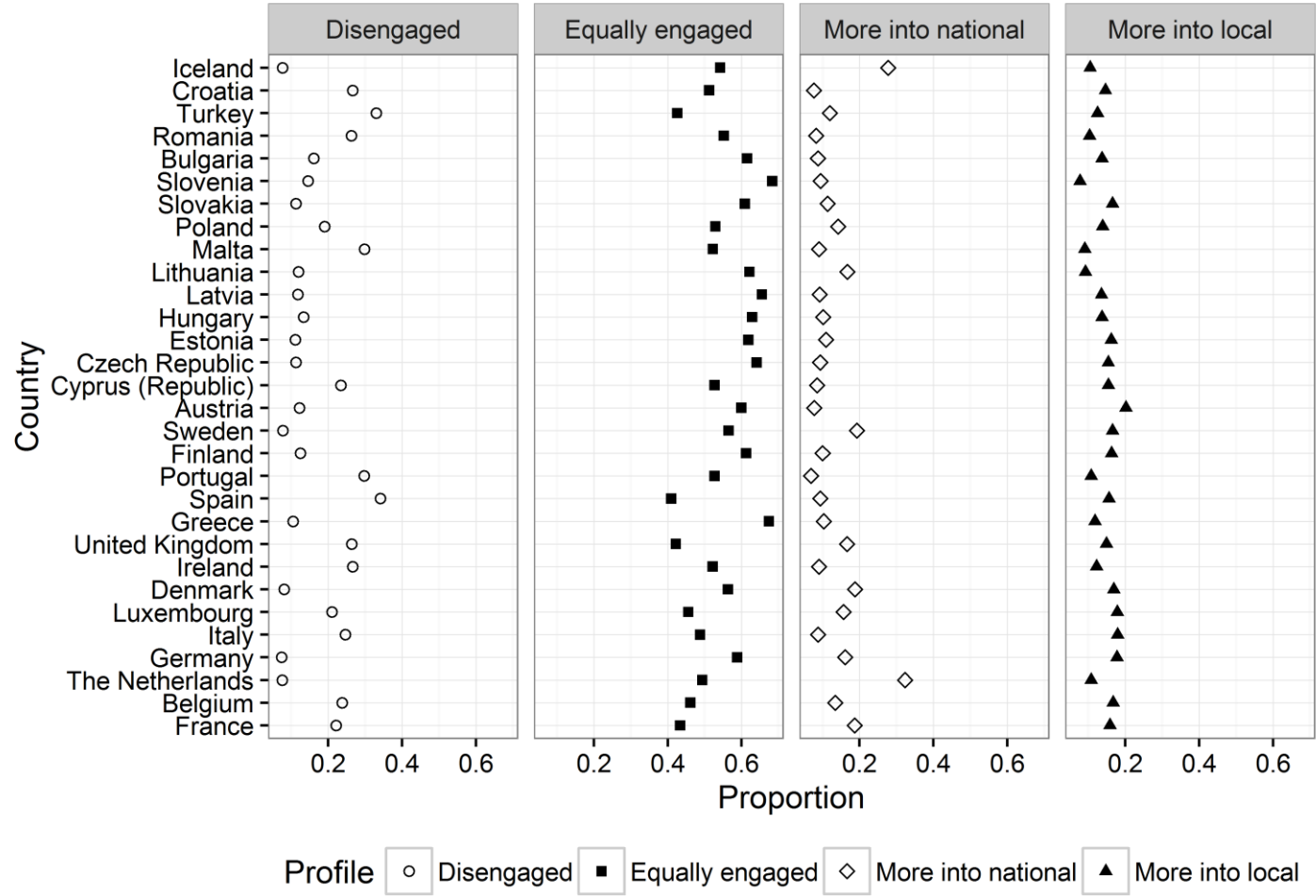


Table 4. Multilevel logit coefficients

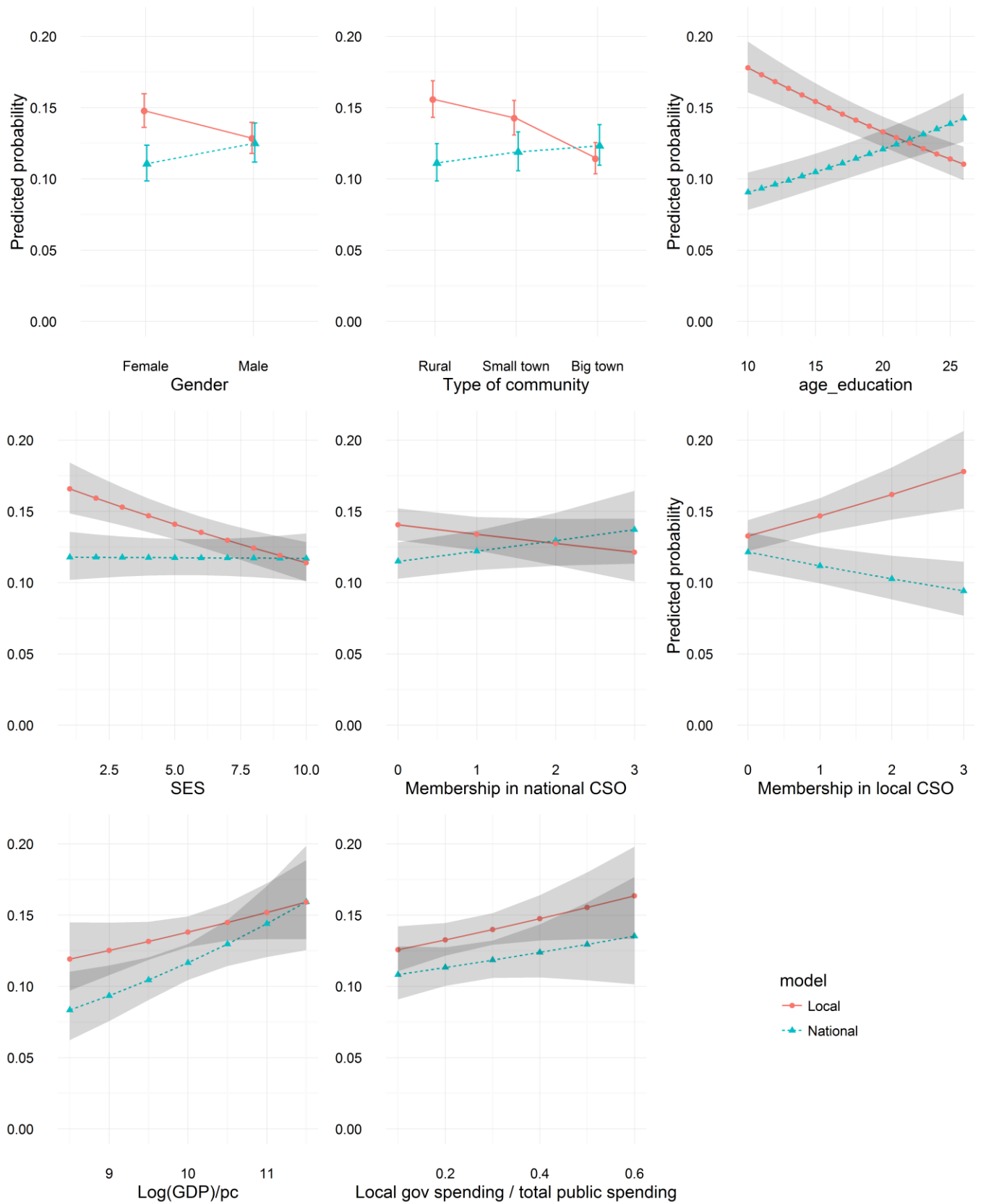
Dependent variable: Profile of political engagement Baseline: Equally engaged in local and national discussions Contrast			
	Disengaged (1)	More into national (2)	More into local (3)
Fixed effects			
Intercept	2.70 (0.20, 5.20)	0.01 (-1.85, 1.87)*	0.23 (-1.16, 1.62) [‡]
<i>Individual level</i>			
Female	1.56 (1.49, 1.63)*	0.86 (0.79, 0.94)*	1.19 (1.12, 1.26)*
Age group (ref: 15-24)			
25-34 years	0.63 (0.51, 0.76)*	0.69 (0.54, 0.83)*	0.79 (0.65, 0.93)*
35-44 years	0.46 (0.33, 0.58)*	0.66 (0.51, 0.80)*	0.74 (0.60, 0.88)*
45-54 years	0.38 (0.25, 0.51)*	0.64 (0.50, 0.79)*	0.70 (0.56, 0.83)*
55-64 years	0.31 (0.18, 0.43)*	0.58 (0.44, 0.72)*	0.67 (0.54, 0.80)*
>64 years	0.40 (0.28, 0.52)*	0.61 (0.47, 0.74)*	0.80 (0.67, 0.93)*
Occupation (ref: inactive)			
Professional/Managerial	0.68 (0.58, 0.79)*	0.94 (0.84, 1.04)	0.89 (0.79, 0.99) [‡]
Manual worker	0.93 (0.83, 1.03)	1.02 (0.91, 1.13)	1.11 (1.00, 1.21) ⁺
Education	0.89 (0.87, 0.90)*	1.03 (1.02, 1.05)*	0.96 (0.95, 0.97)*
Socioeconomic status	0.93 (0.90, 0.95)*	1.00 (0.97, 1.02)	0.95 (0.93, 0.97)*
National CSO	0.96 (0.87, 1.05)	1.08 (1.00, 1.15) ⁺	0.94 (0.87, 1.02)
Local CSO	0.73 (0.64, 0.82)*	0.90 (0.83, 0.98)*	1.13 (1.06, 1.21)*
Community (base: Rural)			
Small/Middle town	0.98 (0.90, 1.07)	1.08 (0.99, 1.18) ⁺	0.89 (0.81, 0.98)*
Big town	1.00 (0.92, 1.09)	1.13 (1.04, 1.23) [‡]	0.68 (0.59, 0.77)*
<i>Country level</i>			
Log (GDP/capita)	1.13 (0.87, 1.39)	1.30 (1.11, 1.49)*	1.13 (0.99, 1.27) ⁺
Local expenditures	0.60 (-0.71, 1.90)	1.72 (0.76, 2.69)	1.95 (1.22, 2.67) ⁺
Random effects			
Standard deviation of intercept	0.49	0.35	0.25
N (individuals)	20,889	19,430	19,970
Log likelihood	-10,193.88	-9,024.86	-9,990.74
Akaike information criterion	20,423.76	18,085.72	20,017.48

Note to Table 4:

Each cell presents the odds ratio (with lower and upper limit of a 95% confidence interval in brackets) effect of a one-unit change in the value of each independent variable in moving from the baseline outcome E (“equally engaged”) towards each alternative outcome within the three contrasts: D (“disengaged at both levels of politics”), N (“discusses more national politics”), L (“discusses more local politics”).

P value: ⁺< 0.05; [‡]< 0.01; *<0.001

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of alternative outcomes by selected values



Note: Each probability value as extracted from the logit model was multiplied by the proportion of respondents in each contrast over the total number of respondents analysed. This procedure ensures that the sum of the predicted probabilities of the four outcomes adds up to 1.

Online appendix

A.1. Classification of civil society organisations

Respondents were asked whether they participated in 14 different types of organisations. These 14 types of organisations were classified depending on whether their scope of intervention was more local, national or, in ambiguous cases, both national and local.

The question asked to respondents was the following:

QE11: “Do you currently participate actively in or do voluntary work for one or more of the following organisations?”

Table A.1. Classification of organisations

Var	Option	Description of organization	Percent in sample	Scope
v514	1	A sports club or club for outdoor activities (recreation organisation)	10%	Local
v515	2	Education, arts, music or cultural association	7%	Both
v516	3	A trade union	4%	National
v517	4	A business or professional organisation	3%	National
v518	5	A consumer organisation	2%	National
v519	6	An international organisation such as development aid organisation or human rights organisation	2%	National
v520	7	An organisation for environmental protection, animal rights, etc.	3%	National
v521	8	A charity organisation or social aid organisation	5%	Local
v522	9	A leisure association for the elderly	3%	Local
v523	10	An organisation for the defence of elderly rights	1%	Both
v524	11	Religious or church organization	5%	Both
v525	12	Political party or organisation	2%	Both
v526	13	Organisation defending the interest of patients and/or disabled	2%	Both
v527	14	Other interest groups for specific causes such as women, people with specific sexual orientation, local issues, etc.	10%	Both

Based on this classification scheme, two variables were computed. “Memb_nat” sums the number of organisations mentioned by the respondent classified as “national” or “both”. “Memb_loc” sums the number of organisations mentioned by the respondent classified as “local” or “both”.

The distributions of these variables are reproduced in tables A.2 and A.3.

Table A.2. Distribution of Memb_nat

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0	23,660	78.31	78.31
1	4,330	14.33	92.64
2	1,407	4.66	97.29

3+	818	2.71	100.00
Total	30,215	100.00	

Table A.3. Distribution of Memb_loc

l	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0	22,280	73.74	73.74
1	5,419	17.93	91.67
2	1,723	5.70	97.38
3+	793	2.62	100.00
Total	30,215	100.00	